

The Production of the Chiang Kai-shek Personality Cult, 1929–1975

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ABSTRACT One of the most visible features of Nationalist rule on Taiwan throughout the period of martial law (1948–87) was the promotion of a personality cult focused on the figure of Chiang Kai-shek. This article is an examination of the ways in which the disparate elements which made up this cult were produced. It considers how the cult reflected a political culture which originated in the Nanjing decade and the subsequent war years, yet which adapted to the realities of post-war exile in Taiwan. This study suggests that whilst the Chiang personality cult was promoted by the central government (and by Chiang himself) it was quasi-official organizations and individuals who were primarily responsible for the production of its written, visual and monumental texts.

Recent scholarship on Taiwan has tended to focus on the dramatic political transformation that the island has experienced over the last two decades, and has stressed the decline of ideologies once espoused by the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, KMT) in the course of democratization. Stéphane Corcuff, for example, has examined the ways in which the symbols of Nationalist rule – including those used in the state-sponsored personality cult of Chiang Kai-shek – became increasingly irrelevant under the years of the Lee Teng-hui presidency.¹ Similarly, others have focused on a lack of public interest in the physical residue of authoritarianism in Taiwan today.²

However, events such as the death of Madame Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Song Meiling) in 2003 and the deposition of Chiang Kai-shek's diaries at Stanford University's Hoover Institution in 2005 have brought the modern history of authoritarianism – and the personality cults it fostered – back on to the public agenda in Taiwan. Such events have forced Taiwan to reconsider the ways in which members of the Chiang family, and in particular Chiang Kai-shek, were glorified during the years of single-party rule. How and why did a personality cult develop around the figure of Chiang Kai-shek? Who was responsible for its production? And how did this cult reflect the particular circumstances in which the Nationalists found themselves in Taiwan?

1. Stéphane Corcuff, "Que reste-t-il de Chiang Kai-shek? Ritualisation d'une commémoration politique à Taiwan" ("What is left of Chiang Kai-shek? Ritualization of a political commemoration in Taiwan"), *Études Chinoises (Chinese Studies)*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (1997), pp. 115–146.

2. Helen Leavey, "Taiwan divided over Chiang's memory," BBC World Service, 11 March 2003.

This article is an attempt to address these questions.³ It represents a preliminary examination of the ways in which Chiang Kai-shek was deified during his lifetime, as well as the scribes, artists and bureaucrats who were involved in this enterprise. As such, it is a study of a personality cult's production rather than reception. It leaves questions of how the cult was interpreted, believed or rejected by different sections of Taiwanese society to future studies. Nevertheless it does seek to explore the political and historical contexts which shaped the production and propagation of the Chiang cult on Taiwan, and to consider how the cult found its origins both in Republican Nanjing and in the dilemmas that the Nationalist regime faced on arrival in Taiwan. In doing so, I also hope to contribute to a wider understanding of the peculiar political culture that developed in post-war Taiwan more generally.

The Origins of the Cult

Chiang Kai-shek's style of leadership – with power centralized in the person of the president and little distinction made between party and state – has been characterized by critics as resembling Leninism in style and form.⁴ Elsewhere, the rule of the Chinese Nationalists prior to their arrival on Taiwan has been described as something more akin to “Confucian fascism.”⁵ In any case, while the nature of Nationalist rule under Chiang can be debated, there is little question that it shared with its Soviet and fascist contemporaries a tendency to promote the mass adoration of leaders. This included the manufacture and distribution of images of Chiang; the naming of streets in his honour; the celebration of his life through textbooks and public events; and, in some cases, the attribution to Chiang of superhuman power and wisdom.

Defenders of Chiang have frequently denied the existence of any formal effort to produce a personality cult around him.⁶ Some have claimed that public praise for him represented a genuine admiration and respect for a strong leader amongst Taiwan's people; others have argued that he was a “saviour in the minds of the Taiwanese,” whom he had been instrumental in freeing from colonialism.⁷ Similarly, Chiang himself rarely mentioned or admitted the existence of a personality cult, and was quick to criticize the “theocracy [of the Soviets] in which Stalin is

3. It could be argued that the cult became its most politically important in the late 1970s, as it was connected to Chiang Ching-kuo's succession. However, that period lies beyond the scope of this article.

4. See, for instance, Jaushieh Joseph Wu, *Taiwan's Democratization: Forces Behind the New Momentum* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 24–25.

5. Frederic Wakeman, Jr., “A revisionist view of the Nanjing Decade: Confucian fascism,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 150 (1997), pp. 395–432.

6. See, for example, Chu Songqiu, “Rang lishi chulai duo shuo hua: Jiang Zhongzheng xiansheng shishi ershi zhou nian” (“Let history speak for itself: the 20th anniversary of Chiang Kai-shek's death”), in *Gan'en yu huaide ji: women chang zai Jiang Gong zuoyou* (A Collection Expressing Gratitude and Longing: We Were Often by Uncle Chiang's Side) (Taipei: Ying shun ren, 2001), pp. 44–52.

7. Chen Che-san, “Chiang Kai-shek's standing in the eyes of the people in Taiwan,” in *Proceedings of the Conference on Chiang Kai-shek and Modern China, Volume V* (Taipei: Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, 1986), p. 570.

deified,”⁸ and to condemn the development of the Mao cult on the mainland as “self-delusional.”⁹

At first glance, the lack of any bureau exclusively responsible for Chiang-centric hagiography would seem to support such a view.¹⁰ Yet an examination of the ways in which particular sections of the Republican state, party and military apparatus encouraged public displays of veneration for Chiang during his lifetime suggests a different scenario. Although it is true that no single agency held responsibility for encouraging veneration of Chiang, a personality cult – something that the political scientist Pao-min Chang has described as “the artificial elevation of the status and authority of one man ... through the deliberate creation, projection and propagation of a godlike image”¹¹ – did indeed exist in Taiwan in the post-war years. The many hands involved in the creation of this cult shared a common goal of raising Chiang above the level of others, and making his rule appear permanent and unalterable.

The nature of the Chiang cult in Taiwan cannot be understood without first looking at its origins in the “Nanjing decade” (1927–37) and the political culture that developed in China during that era. As Jonathan Fenby’s biography of Chiang Kai-shek suggests, it was during the Nanjing years that Chiang sought to legitimize his leadership of the KMT and the country by presenting himself as both a leader of the Republican revolution and a personification of Chinese history and culture. Fenby depicts Chiang as a man who consciously used Confucian precepts of piety and loyalty to inspire respect, and who imagined himself as a “paterfamilias” of the Chinese nation.¹²

Chiang attempted to reinvent himself as a faithful disciple of Sun Yat-sen during the Nanjing decade, working his public image into state-sponsored deification of Sun and the construction and consecration of sites in the landscape associated with the Republic’s founder. The city of Nanjing itself “provided a symbolic space where ... [a] ... link between nation, progress and the party could be made.”¹³ For example, it

8. From Jiang Zhongzheng, “Fangong kang'E jiben lun” (“The basic theory of opposing communism and fighting against the Soviets”), in *Xian Zongtong Jiang Gong sixiang yanlun zongji, di ba juan* (*The Collected Thoughts and Utterances of the late President Chiang, Volume 8*) (Taipei: Zhongyang weiyuanhui dangshihui, 1984), esp. p. 63.

9. From Jiang Zhongzheng, “Junshi jiaoyu de jige jiben wenti, bing tishi jingcha jiaoyu de zhiqiu” (“A few basic questions regarding military education, and some points on the intentions of police education”), in *Xian Zongtong Jiang Gong sixiang yanlun zongji, di ershijiu juan* (*The Collected Thoughts and Utterances of the Late President Chiang, Volume 29*) (Taipei: Zhongyang weiyuanhui dangshihui, 1984), p. 200. The following section of this passage is enlightening, with Chiang rhetorically asking his audience: “Today, would you also create a deified leader (*shenhua de lingxiu*) who would lead the country and yourselves to ruin, and who would be regretted throughout the world for generations to come?”

10. As would the fact that there is no single Chinese phrase or word for “personality cult,” the closest equivalent being “*shenhua*” or “deification.”

11. Pao-min Chang, “The phenomenon of power: some random thoughts,” *Zhongshan xueshu luncong* (*Chungshan Academic Writings*), No. 18 (2000), p. 141.

12. Jonathan Fenby, *Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the China He Lost* (London: The Free Press, 2003), pp. 225–6.

13. Liping Wang, “Creating a national symbol: the Sun Yatsen Memorial in Nanjing,” *Republican China*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (1996), pp. 23–63.

was here that the tradition of naming thoroughfares after members of the Republican pantheon – and Chiang himself – was first undertaken systematically. The new Republican capital also came to be widely associated with its massive Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall, a site that Chiang consecrated amongst much fanfare in 1929. And it was in this era that Chiang reportedly chose a site – near to, but topographically lower than, Sun’s remains – for his own burial.¹⁴

Such instances tempt us to view the state-sponsored veneration of Chiang as something of the generalissimo’s own making, and one which was forced upon the population through organs of government.¹⁵ However, while Nanjing provided a canvas upon which Chiang could canonize himself as Sun’s heir, it also became home to quasi-official organizations which aided Chiang in his endeavours, yet in a largely independent fashion. Representative of these was the Officers’ Moral Endeavour Association (OMEA, *lizhishe*), an organization founded by graduates of the Whampoa Military Academy in 1929, and modelled largely on the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA).¹⁶ Although the original goals of the OMEA were to “instil an uplifting moral influence in the Huang Poo cadets [sic]”¹⁷ and provide entertainment and educational services for members of the armed forces, the Association found its calling in the production of propaganda focused on Chiang Kai-shek and his wife.

The OMEA was one of many organizations that developed in the Nanjing years and which shared a common belief in the need for a strong leader for China. Indeed, as Frederic Wakeman has shown, the use of the term *lingxiu* (leader/*fürher*) in reference to Chiang Kai-shek, a practice that was to become a mainstay of the Chiang cult on Taiwan, can be attributed not to Chiang himself but to followers from a group known as the Lixingshe who sought to promote loyalty to their mentor.¹⁸ Like the Lixingshe, the OMEA appears to have been largely self-inspired in its adulation for Chiang. There was a genuine desire amongst the OMEA’s leadership – especially its founder, J. L. Huang (Huang Renlin), who had

14. A point noted in Rudolph G. Wagner, “Reading the Chairman Mao Memorial Hall in Peking: the tribulations of the implied pilgrim,” in Susan Naquin and Chün-fang Yü (eds.), *Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China* (Taipei: SMC Publishing, 1994), p. 390.

15. This is the picture that emerges in accounts given by Chiang’s wife Ch’en Chieh-ju, in which Chiang is described as consciously promoting an association between himself and Sun during the early Nanjing years in an attempt to overcome the distrust in his leadership that was harboured by sections of the KMT. See Lloyd E. Eastman (ed.), *Chiang Kai-shek’s Secret Past: the Memoir of his Second Wife, Ch’en Chieh-ju* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 248–250.

16. The most comprehensive source of information on the OMEA is that found in three articles written by a former OMEA member, Hou Wugao: Hou Wugao, “KangRi zhanzheng qian de lizhishe (shang)” (“The OMEA prior to the War of Resistance (Part 1)”), *Zhuanji wenxue* (*Biographical Literature*), Vol. 68, No. 4 (1996), pp. 26–34; Hou Wugao, “KangRi zhanzheng qian de lizhishe (xia)” (“The OMEA prior to the War of Resistance (Part II)”), *Zhuanji wenxue* (*Biographical Literature*), Vol. 68, No. 5 (1996), pp. 71–82; Hou Wugao, “KangRi zhanzheng qijian de lizhishe” (“The OMEA during the War of Resistance”), *Zhuanji Wenxue* (*Biographical Literature*), Vol. 68, No. 6 (1996), pp. 101–106.

17. J. L. Huang, *Memoirs of J. L. Huang* (Taipei: Ying zhong chubanshe, 1983), p. 46.

18. Wakeman, “A revisionist view of the Nanjing Decade,” p. 405.

studied music in the United States, and was personally close to the Chiang family – to encourage such loyalty on a mass scale.

The work of the OMEA intensified with the outbreak of war with Japan, “its art department ... [becoming] ... an important center in Chungking [Chongqing], supplying posters for propaganda ... and decorations for public buildings.”¹⁹ In Chongqing, the OMEA fostered artists such as Liang Zhongming²⁰ and Xu Jiuling, painters who spent much of the 1930s drilling conscripts in the art of reproducing Chiang’s likeness on canvas. The Association’s role in military liaison also provided opportunities for OMEA members such as Hu Chongxian, a journalist who was appointed as Chiang Kai-shek’s personal photographer in 1938, to learn from Soviet and American propaganda techniques.²¹ Indeed, the OMEA emerged by the end of the Second World War as the most important training ground in which the artists, photographers and writers who were later to build the Chiang Kai-shek cult on Taiwan first learnt their trade.

Furthermore, during the war years, Chiang’s allies abroad played a notable role in enhancing his image at home. Chiang was popularized most widely in publications owned by the Luce family, with photojournalists such as *Life* magazine’s Margaret Bourke-White being commissioned to produce flattering portraits of China’s “first couple.”²² Although the production of these images was not necessarily part of the same process as that undertaken by groups such as the OMEA, it nevertheless provided some of the raw material from which the producers of the Chiang cult in Republican China could draw.²³ At any rate, the stylized images of the generalissimo appearing on the covers of American magazines could not have gone unnoticed by OMEA artists and photographers – or by Chiang himself.

All this suggests that there was a very clear desire on the part of Chiang Kai-shek to be glorified, but that such efforts were only made possible thanks to smaller groups (such as the OMEA). It is also evident that Chiang’s cult drew on American, Soviet and West European propaganda and methods of leader-worship for inspiration. All these factors were to prove significant to the development of the Chiang cult in later decades.

19. Emily Hahn, *The Soong Sisters* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1943), p. 147.

20. “Ming huajia Liang Zhongming shilüe” (“A brief biography of the famous painter Liang Zhongming”), *Guangdong wenxian* (Canton Documents), Vol. 24, No. 3 (1994), pp. 70–71.

21. *Hu Chongxian sheying xuanji* (A Selection of Hu Chongxian’s Photography) (Taipei: Guoli lishi bowuguan, 1971).

22. Just as she had been in the case of Stalin. Margaret Bourke-White, *Portrait of Myself* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), pp. 182–86.

23. On the Luce connection to Chiang, see T. Christopher Jespersen, “‘Spreading the American dream’ of China: united China relief, the Luce family, and the creation of American conceptions of China before Pearl Harbor,” *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (1992), pp. 269–294.

Importing the Cult into Taiwan

Taiwan was “retroceded” to Chinese rule at the end of the Second World War. At one level, the island’s incorporation into the Chinese Republic at that time saw a repetition of many of the same techniques that had been employed by the Nationalist authorities in mainland localities under their jurisdiction. One example was the extensive use of Chiang Kai-shek’s name – Zhongzheng – in the christening of schools, parks and thoroughfares in Taiwan, usually in tandem with similar institutions named after Sun Yat-sen. This began within weeks of Taiwan’s cession to Chinese rule in 1945, marking a continuation of the efforts that had been made in Nanjing and Chongqing, so that by the time of the Nationalist government’s complete relocation to Taipei in 1949, almost every city and town in Taiwan could claim a Zhongzheng Lu (Chiang Kai-shek Road) and a Zhongshan Lu (Sun Yat-sen Road) thanks to the efforts of zealous city and county administrators.²⁴ Similarly, other techniques first employed on the mainland were used in Taiwan in this era. Stéphane Corcuff notes that the first statue of Chiang to appear in Taiwan was raised only 192 days after retrocession.²⁵ And by the early 1950s, Chiang’s face was criss-crossing the Taiwanese countryside on the front of “propaganda trains” (*xuanchuan lieche*),²⁶ just as it had done on the mainland a few years earlier.²⁷

Yet this is not to suggest that Taiwan’s incorporation into the Chinese Republic resulted in a simple replication of the Chiang cult on the mainland. The personality cult had also to respond to the specific needs of a government that sought legitimacy in the eyes of a populace who had been subjects of the Japanese emperor for the preceding half century. This desire for legitimacy inspired a conscious effort on the part of the central government to co-opt both the physical and intellectual residue of Japanese colonialism in Taiwan into the service of leader-worship.

24. In a recent study of toponyms in the city of Jiayi, for instance, Wu Yuzhen shows that it was a locally-organized committee which decided to give Sun and Chiang the highest priority when renaming streets in the immediate post-war era. See Wu Yuzhen, “Cong diming de bianqian kan butong zhengquan de tezhi: yi Jiayi shi jieluming wei li” (“Examining the characteristics of different regimes through changes in toponyms: the example of street names in Jiayi city”), paper presented at the Diyi jie diming xueshu yantaohui (First Academic Conference on Toponyms), Academia Sinica, 17 December 2004. On the use of Chiang’s name in streets generally, see Lin Xiuche, “San zhong guan San Tai” (“The three ‘zhongs’ dissect Taiwan”), *Taiwan wenxian (Taiwan Documents)*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (2002), pp. 59–61. Whilst local governments were ultimately responsible for the naming of streets, the uniformity with which Chiang’s name appeared would suggest a general desire amongst lower-ranking officials to please the presidential palace. This theme is returned to below.

25. Stéphane Corcuff, “The symbolic dimension of democratization and the transition of national identity under Lee Teng-hui,” in Stéphane Corcuff (ed.), *Memories of the Future: National Identity Issues and the Search for a New Taiwan*, (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2002), p. 80.

26. Dai Yuefang and Luo Jifu, *Taiwan quan jilu (Taiwan Chronicle)* (Taipei, 1990), p. 378.

27. Fenby, *Generalissimo*, p. 154. The technique of affixing leaders’ portraits to trains appears to have been copied from the Soviet use of “agit-trains” and “agit-ships.” See Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives: The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 68.

Many of the sites that had been most closely associated with the power of the government-general and the Imperial Army under Japanese colonial rule, for instance, were enlisted into the service of Chiang's cult. The presidential palace (*zongtong fu*) in Taipei, which had been built in the 1910s to house the chambers of the colonial government-general in Taiwan, was officially renamed the Jieshou Tang (literally "the Hall of Chiang Kai-shek's Longevity") within weeks of Taiwan's cession to Chinese rule.²⁸ The slopes of Yangmingshan to the north of Taipei – an area long associated with the Japanese military which had been rendered largely off-limits to civilians during wartime – were also forcibly worked into this Chiang cult, with the planting there of a copse in the shape of the characters *zhong* and *zheng*,²⁹ something that may also have been copied from Japanese examples.³⁰

Furthermore, just as sites and associations that the Japanese had left in Taiwan's landscape could be made to serve a purpose in the post-war cult of Chiang, so could colonialism's intangible heritage. Taiwan-born artists who had learnt to paint under colonial rule could be encouraged to produce visual images of Republican heroes. One of the most representative examples was Li Meishu, a Japanese-trained, Taiwan-born painter who began to produce portraits of Chiang Kai-shek and Sun Yat-sen for local government agencies only weeks after the end of colonial rule.³¹ Li's work was noticed by Madame Chiang Kai-shek at local exhibitions, and by the end of the 1940s the artist was painting portraits of Chiang on a regular basis, a small number of which can still be found in public spaces throughout Taiwan.³² Similarly the Taiwan-born sculptor Cai Shunhe was responsible for designing bronze statues of Chiang and Sun that decorated public spaces in the city of Jiayi.³³

28. Joe Hung, "Chiang Kai-shek's legacy to freedom in Taiwan," *The China Post*, 31 October 2001, p. 4.

29. It is unclear as to who was ultimately responsible for this copse's creation. However, it should be noted that, according to Guo Binwei, Chiang personally ordered the copse to be forcibly overgrown so that his name would *not* be seen. The order is quoted in Guo Binwei, "Yonghuai Jiang Gong deze" ("I shall always remember the charity of Uncle Chiang"), in *Gan'en yu huaide ji: women chang zai Jiang Gong zuoyou (A Collection Expressing Gratitude and Longing: We Were Often by Uncle Chiang's Side)* (Taipei: Ying shun ren, 2001), p. 131.

30. It is likely that the Nationalists were aware of instances in Taiwan where Chinese characters had been carved into the landscape by colonial engineers. A pond in the grounds of the Taipei Guesthouse (Taibei binguan) – a state property first built as the residence of the colonial governor-general – was designed in the shape of the character *kokoro* (*xin* in Chinese). The use of similar methods in the veneration of other dictators was highlighted in 2000 by the discovery of a copse in the shape of a swastika in the German state of Brandenburg that was believed to date from the 1930s.

31. Ni Zaiqin, "Zai tan Li Meishu de fengge zhuanbian" ("Revisiting changes in Li Meishu's style"), *Yishu jia (Artist)*, No. 227 (1994), pp. 348–361.

32. Huang Shude, "Li Meishu shouhui Jiang Gong, Guofu yixiang Beixian yihui dang yishu xiangua" ("Portraits of Chiang Kai-shek and Sun Yat-sen hand-painted by Li Meishu are hanging as works of art in the Taipei County Assembly"), *Zhongguo shibao (The China Times)*, 21 January 2003, p. 20.

33. Huang Meijun, "Cai Youtu diaokeguo de simiao shenming jinshen bianji quanTai" ("The images of gods and Buddhas that Cai Youtu has carved can be found in temples throughout Taiwan"), News report, ETTV News (Taiwan), 4 March 2004.

Moreover, relocation to Taiwan had ramifications for the institutions and individuals involved in the production of the cult. The establishment of new institutions in the immediate post-war years specifically designed to instil loyalty for Chiang amongst the populace and produce propaganda similar to that which the Communists had used to such effect in the civil war, also influenced the development of the Chiang cult, providing the institutional framework within which the efforts that groups such as the OMEA had started in Nanjing could be continued. The single most important of these was the General Political Department (zhengzhi ganbu xunlian ban), predecessor of today's Fuhsing Kang College (zhengzhi zhanzheng xuexiao), which was founded under the auspices of Chiang's son Chiang Ching-kuo (Jiang Jinguo) in 1950, and was modelled on similar institutions in the Soviet Union.³⁴ From its establishment, the Department became instrumental in producing many of the texts that were used in the promotion of the Chiang cult. Indeed, its Fine Arts Department emerged as an institutional home for former OMEA members, such as Liang Zhongming, and enabled such individuals to pass their propaganda skills on to the likes of Li Qimao, a celebrated producer of agitprop portraits of Chiang that were hung in public buildings around Taiwan in later decades.³⁵ The General Political Department also produced written texts through which the ideas and admonitions of President Chiang were distributed to members of the armed forces.³⁶

The General Political Department's work amongst military cadres was complemented by other agencies formed under Chiang Ching-kuo's tutelage in the same period, most noticeably the China Youth Corps (jiuguotuan). Founded in 1952, the Corps promoted allegiance to Chiang amongst schoolchildren on Taiwan, and organized the participation of Taiwan's youth in public displays of patriotism.³⁷ It even sponsored young intellectuals to travel abroad and learn leader-worship skills in other authoritarian societies. Roberto Liang (Liang Junwu), one of the most celebrated painters of Chiang Kai-shek portraits in the 1970s, had travelled to Spain in the 1960s to pursue studies with funding from the Corps. It was there that he had learnt the art of producing iconic portraits of dictators and their families, having "had the honour of painting portrait [sic] of Miss Bina Franco, the sister of Generalissimo Franco."³⁸

34. Steve Tsang, "Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang's policy to reconquer the Chinese mainland, 1949–1958," in Steve Tsang (ed.), *In the Shadow of China: Political Developments in Taiwan since 1949* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1993), p. 50–51.

35. Exhibition Department, *Ink Painting by Li Chi-mao* (Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 1995), pp. 70–71.

36. Monte R. Bullard, *The Soldier and the Citizen: the Role of the Military in Taiwan's Development* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1997), pp. 161–62.

37. Thomas A. Brindley, *The China Youth Corps in Taiwan* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), esp. pp. 31–51.

38. Yi Langting, *Liang Junwu zuopinji (The Works of Roberto Liang)* (Taipei, 1975), no page number; see also Lin Yi, "Mei de zhuixunzhe Liang Junwu" ("Roberto Liang: a seeker of beauty"), *Zhongyang (Central)*, Vol. 15, No. 11 (1983), pp. 157–160.

Adapting to Exile

Whilst Taiwan's retrocession in 1945, and the subsequent evacuation of the central government to Taipei in 1949, resulted directly in the establishment of new institutions responsible for the maintenance of the personality cult, Nationalist exile also shaped the ways in which Chiang was presented. The circumstances by which Chiang had come to find himself in Taiwan (defeat in the civil war), the peculiar situation by which the sites associated with Chiang's life in China no longer fell under Nationalist jurisdiction, as well as fear of invasion and internal unrest, all shaped the ways in which Chiang was depicted and praised.

Comparing incumbent leaders to the "great men" of history is a practice common to many personality cults.³⁹ Such comparisons enable living leaders to claim some of the glory with which mythical or historical figures are traditionally associated, or present themselves as the natural heirs to political or ideological lineages. It is unsurprising, then, that in the early post-retrocession era, anxiety over the question of the legitimacy of Chiang's government on Taiwan appears to have encouraged efforts to link Chiang to an historical folk hero who was widely revered there: Koxinga (Zheng Chenggong), the 17th-century Ming loyalist who had made southern Taiwan his base against the Manchus.

The parallels between Koxinga and Chiang (both anti-colonial heroes who had fought against "illegitimate" mainland regimes from bases on Taiwan) were stressed by the Nationalist government almost as soon as Chiang had evacuated to Taipei. Sites associated with Koxinga were restored and celebrated. By 1950, Chiang Kai-shek's calligraphy adorned a shrine that Japanese colonizers had raised in honour of Koxinga.⁴⁰ In government-sponsored publications, Koxinga's exploits were described with reference to Nationalist-inspired vocabulary that recalled Chiang's own campaigns: Koxinga's victory against the Dutch East India Company being termed a "retrocession of Taiwan" (*fuTai*);⁴¹ his campaign against the Qing a "northern expedition" (*beifa*).⁴² Indeed, at times, the figures of Chiang and Koxinga even seem to have been deliberately conflated in official discourse. As Marshall Johnson has noted in referring to the Nationalist government's presentation of Koxinga as a "pre-incarnation"⁴³ of Chiang, propaganda collapsed the centuries that separated the

39. As Maureen Perrie reminds us in "The tsar, the emperor, the leader: Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great and Anatolii Rybakov's Stalin," in Nick Lampert and Gábor T. Rittersporn (eds.), *Stalinism: Its Nature and Aftermath. Essays in Honour of Moshe Lewin* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 77–100.

40. Apart from Confucius temples, the Koxinga temple was one of the few non-Christian religious institutions in Taiwan at which Chiang's calligraphy was displayed.

41. Chen Hanguang, "Zhengshi fuTai yu qi kaituo" ("Taiwan's retrocession under the Zheng family, and its colonization"), *Taiwan wenxian*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1961), pp. 39–54.

42. Huang Yuqi, "Ming Zheng Chenggong beifa sanbai nian jinian" ("In memory of the 300th anniversary of Koxinga's northern expedition"), *Taiwan wenxian*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (1960), pp. 1–66.

43. Marshall Johnson, "Making time: historic preservation and the space of nationality," *positions*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1994), p. 199.

two figures. Both were labelled “*minzu yingxiong*” (hero[es] of the nation) on statue-bases, for example.⁴⁴

Comparisons between Chiang and Koxinga became standard fare for Nationalist scribes. Indeed, some of the most active promoters of the Chiang personality cult were also involved in the promotion of Koxinga-related activities. Zheng Yanfen, a KMT cadre who held a number of Cabinet-level positions under Chiang, was not only one of the most energetic promoters of “Chiang Kai-shek Thought” (*Jiang Zhongzheng sixiang*) – Taiwan’s short-lived response to Maoism – but also claimed a lineal connection to Koxinga, and was involved in the organization of government commemorations of the Ming loyalist.⁴⁵

Relocation to Taiwan also had other ramifications for the ways in which “the leader” was promoted. In Taipei, Chiang was distanced from the very sites that were so central to the mythologies of Republican nationhood, especially those constructed or consecrated during the Nanjing decade. With all contact to the mainland cut off after 1949, it was impossible for anyone in Taiwan to travel to those sites that had come to be woven into Chiang’s cult of personality, such as his birthplace in Zhejiang or his seats of government in Nanjing and Chongqing. These localities could be commemorated in the street names of Taiwan’s cities or on the maps hung on classroom walls, but they could never be experienced.

This disconnection between Chiang’s government and the land he claimed to represent is far too wide a topic to explore in any depth here. Yet it could well be argued that the absence of China’s physical territory translated into specific modes of veneration in post-war Taiwan, such as the idea that Chiang was a leader who had been infused with the topographical qualities of China itself. If the people of Taiwan could not physically touch the territory lost to communism, they could at least adore the man who symbolized it. In a process that Geremie Barmé has termed “geospiritual remerging” between leader and landscape, Chiang’s biographers often described their patron as a man who had become one with the landscape of his native land, suggesting that his personality had been moulded by the Zhejiang landscape. Hollington Tong (Dong Xian-guang), one of the KMT’s most celebrated propagandists, accredited Chiang’s “reserve” and steadfastness to the rarefied air of the Xikou hills.⁴⁶

44. The most thorough study of this association between Koxinga and Chiang Kai-shek is that found in Ralph C. Croizier’s book *Koxinga and Chinese Nationalism: History, Myth and the Hero* (Cambridge, MA: East Asian Research Center, Harvard University, 1977), esp. pp. 63–69.

45. Zheng Xiangheng, “Fayang Zheng Chenggong jingshen de Yan Gong” (“In praise of Uncle Yan who promoted the Koxinga spirit”), in Chen Bozhong (ed.), *Zheng Yanfen xiansheng jinian ji* (*A Commemorative Collection for Mr Zheng Yanfen*) (Taipei: Yanfen wenjiao jijinhui, 1991), pp. 218–220.

46. Quoted in W. G. Goddard, *The Makers of Taiwan* (Taipei: China Publishing Company, 1963), esp. pp. 144–162. Much of this chapter (entitled “Chiang Kai-shek: the man of destiny”) is a thesis on the part that mountains played in moulding Chiang’s character.

Chiang did seemingly enjoy high altitudes, a fact to which the dozens of presidential *xingguan* (residences) he ordered to be built in the hills and mountains of Taiwan attest. Yet the constant references to Chiang as a man of alpine qualities; the propensity that photographers such as Hu Chongxian had for capturing images of Chiang in mountainous climes; and even the claim that the temporary resting site for Chiang's body in Cihu was chosen because of its topographical similarities to his hometown in the mainland would all suggest that the links between Chiang and the mountains of Zhejiang were very much forced.⁴⁷ Such associations helped reinforce the idea that Chiang was not simply the leader of China, but was himself a physical personification of the country.

Another way in which distance from the mainland was overcome was by presenting Chiang as a leader who lived beyond the confines of time, a practice that Frederic Wakeman has termed "historification." For Wakeman, Chiang Kai-shek's death in 1975, together with the mourning rituals that were held directly thereafter, set off a process whereby public displays of affection for Chiang amongst sections of the public and the bureaucracy were abstracted. Unlike in the cases of other leaders (such as Lenin, Mao) who were commemorated primarily as physical beings and whose remains became key objects of commemoration, posthumous commemoration of Chiang focused on the virtues and wisdom of the generalissimo. In being laid to temporary rest in Taiwan, argues Wakeman, Chiang was praised as a "moral paragon" who was "distant in death as in life," rather than as a physical being.⁴⁸

Yet I would argue that the process of "historification" started well before Chiang's death in 1975, and was a defining feature of the personality cult – a direct response to the conundrums of exile. By its very nature, the Chiang cult entailed an attempt to transform a living leader into an historical or quasi-mythical figure so that the transience and recentness of Chiang's rule on Taiwan could be replaced by a façade of permanence.

The Chiang cult relied on an official ability to collapse time (in merging Chiang with other "great men"), or to freeze it completely (by inscribing Chiang's name into the landscape, and his face into the collective "mind's eye"). Portraiture and statuary presented Chiang as a figure removed from historical time. Here was a leader who never aged, and whose tenure was permanent and unchanging. Chiang's name and image became fixtures in state rituals, items of government pageantry with a significance equivalent to that of the national flag or anthem.

Many of the texts through which Chiang was celebrated betrayed signs of this need to "historify" the president. In school textbooks, for instance, Chiang was commonly depicted as a figure who existed beyond the confines of time. In their deliberate appeals to the morality tales of

47. Steven Crook, *Keeping up with the War God: Taiwan, As It Seemed to Me* (Brighton: Yushan Publications, 2001), pp. 44–48.

48. Frederic Wakeman, Jr., "Mao's Remains," in James L. Watson and Evelyn S. Rawski (eds.), *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 280–81.

classical Chinese literature, as well as their setting in *ancien régime* China, the stories in many textbooks played a similar role to official portraiture by depicting Chiang as someone who floated above the chaos of modern history. Most of these stories were set in some hazy and ambiguous pre-Republican age before the “year zero” of the 1911 Revolution, and like the socialist realist literature of the communist bloc, portrayed Chiang as a leader possessing a wisdom that was timeless.⁴⁹

A Competitive Cult

In the conclusion to his biography of Chiang Kai-shek, Brian Crozier makes a distinction between Chiang’s Taiwan and Mao’s mainland. For Crozier, Chiang’s may have been an authoritarian regime; “it was not, however, a totalitarian one.” Crozier views Taiwan under Chiang as a society in which the political sphere was defined by stringent restrictions, yet also as a place in which people could just as easily choose not to partake in politics if they wished.⁵⁰

Whilst Crozier’s rather simplistic distinction could well be debated, his argument does highlight an important question about the nature of the Chiang personality cult; for if, indeed, it was possible for people to choose to remain aloof from politics, does this mean that individuals and organizations who took part in the promotion of Chiang chose willingly to do so?⁵¹ Did portraitists, for example, *choose* to paint Chiang, or were they forcibly *used* to produce images of their leader, as some are in societies such as North Korea today?⁵²

For certain members of the Taiwanese public, there was certainly no question of choosing to partake in the invention and maintenance of the Chiang cult. The accounts of martial-law-era political prisoners published in recent years, for example, have shown that enforced maintenance of Chiang statuary formed part of the indoctrination that critics of the

49. One of the most widely-circulated of these tales was “Ni you guan yu” (“Watching fish swim against the current”). This story told of the admiration that Chiang felt when observing fish swimming upstream in a river near his childhood home. For renditions of this story, see Liang Zhongming, *Women de weida lingxiu (Our Great Leader)* (Taipei: Xin Zhongguo wenhua chubanshe, 1954), pp. 17–18; see also Zheng Jizu, *Jiang Zhongzheng (Chiang Kai-shek)* (Taipei: Taiwan dongfang chuban gongsi, 1996), pp. 15–17.

50. Brian Crozier, *The Man Who Lost China* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1976), p. 378.

51. Any attempt to address this question properly is hindered by something which is common to many personality cults, and which Jeffrey Brooks has termed the “theft of agency”: i.e. the fact that any personality cult is, by its very nature, supposed to appear natural and without origins, rather than the result of hagiographic artifice. This means that many of the texts used in a personality cult are either left authorless or are accredited to the leader around whom the cult is built. On this point, see Jeffrey Brooks, “Stalin’s politics of obligation,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2003), pp. 47–48. Many of the visual and written texts used in the Chiang cult were in fact authorless. Whilst some of the more famous of Chiang’s biographers (e.g. Hollington Tong) did claim the texts they created, dozens of other scribes remained nameless. The same was the case for visual texts, with paintings of Chiang often containing no clue as to the identity of their creators.

52. On the relationship between artists and the state in North Korea, see Jane Portal, “Art in North Korea,” *Oriental Art*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (2003), pp. 19–27 (esp. pp. 26–27).

Nationalist government were made to endure.⁵³ The fact that public displays of affection for Chiang often involved schoolchildren and army conscripts – groups that certainly had no choice but to follow orders – would also suggest that participation was mandatory.⁵⁴

Yet none of this can discount the fact that many individuals appear to have chosen to get involved in Chiang's veneration. In some cases, such as with members of the OMEA and their disciples, the desire to praise Chiang was ideological, and reflected a deep-seated belief in the importance of a strong national leader. And for local-level officials, the chance to demonstrate loyalty to the *lingxiu* by inscribing his name into the streets of regional cities might have translated into career advancement or favour from Taipei. For others, however, the personality cult offered benefits of a decidedly material nature.

Interesting insights emerge from studies conducted by Taiwanese art historians such as Zheng Shuiping, who has argued that the vast number of statues of Chiang produced during the 1950s was not the result of an enforced directive, but rather of competition amongst sculptors and designers who saw such work as a means to improve their own professional standing.⁵⁵ Indeed, the production of a substantial percentage of Chiang statuary was not directly commissioned, but was tendered by way of advertisements in the *Central Daily News* (*Zhongyang ribao*); artists, as well as others such as construction companies, chose to compete against each other for government and Party contracts.⁵⁶ The picture that emerges is thus one of an environment in which individuals willingly produced Chiang statuary out of professional and commercial concerns.

Just as production of Chiang paraphernalia appears to have been undertaken in this environment of competition, so was its distribution. Wang Feng of the *China Times* (*Zhongguo shibao*) has argued that, in the latter years of martial law, a trade in signed portraits of the president emerged, with people actively seeking to acquire these objects.⁵⁷ Like authoritarian antecedents to the brand-name furnishings that fill Taipei apartments today, images of Chiang were thus not always forced upon households, but were in some cases sought as symbols of power and influence. Whilst such a practice does not negate the fact that schools and public offices were required by law to adorn their walls with Chiang's

53. See, for instance, Huang Kewu *et al.* (eds.), *Jieyan shiqi Taibei diqu zhengzhi anjian kaoshu lishi: di'er ji* (*Taipei-area Political Cases during the Martial-law Era: Second Volume*) (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, jindai lishi yanjiusuo, 1999), esp. pp. 866–67.

54. It is no coincidence that it was the two central government agencies responsible for these groups of citizens – the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of National Defence – which were also particularly important in the overall production of the cult's texts.

55. Zheng Shuiping, "Taiwan zhanhou diaosu de po yu li (zhong)" ("The positive and negative aspects of sculpture in post-war Taiwan (Part II)"), *Xiongshi meishu* (*Hsiung Shih Art Monthly*), No. 274, (1993), pp. 57–65.

56. Huang Youqin, "Zhizuo Sun Yixian, Jiang Jieshi: Taibeishi geji gongli xuexiao nei weiren suxiang shezhi zhi yanjiu" ("Manufacturing Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek: a study of the installation of statues of great men in educational institutions of all levels in Taipei city"), masters thesis, Graduate Institute of Fine Arts, National Central University, June 1999, pp. 90–92.

57. Wang Feng, *Jiang jia enchou lu* (*The Kindness and Enmity of the Chiang Family*) (Taipei: Shibao wenhua, 1997), pp. 126–29.

image, it does raise questions about the extent to which participation in the Chiang cult was purely a “top-down” phenomenon.

Even at the highest levels of officialdom, it appears that participation in the production of monumental works of commemoration for Chiang (such as biographies and official portraits) could be converted into a successful career in the ranks of party and government. The architect Yang Zhuocheng was chosen to design the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall in Taipei not simply because he was a personal friend of the late president, but because he had proven his loyalty to the Republic’s leaders by building other sites through which Nationalist personality cults were expounded (namely the National Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall). Similarly, the glittering diplomatic career of Hollington Tong cannot be separated from his prolificacy as a biographer of Chiang.

The cult’s production was thus supported by a political and public culture in which participation in the Chiang cult was rewarded. Like the Iraqi artists who once specialized in producing portraits of Saddam Hussein, and who, according to Roula Khalaf, had “no particular personal affection for the leader,” participation in the personality cult could “bring personal benefit.”⁵⁸ In Taiwan’s case, one could even speculate about the extent to which such motives explain the reluctance on the part of many persons today to discuss their involvement in the Chiang cult. And the persistence of this culture of competition may also explain why critics of the island’s current leadership, in response to the mass production of paraphernalia and hagiography centred on the person of Chen Shui-bian in recent years, have warned of the possibility of a new “personality cult” emerging in democratic Taiwan.⁵⁹

Concluding Thoughts

Chiang Kai-shek died on 5 April 1975. But rather than signal the demise of his personality cult, his death resulted in some of the grandest acts and sites of commemoration in his honour – from elaborate funerary rites to the erection of two memorial complexes, one at each end of the island. An understanding of the generalissimo’s posthumous cult would, of course, shed even greater light on the nature of Nationalist rule, and explain how, in death, Chiang’s legacy was used by his political and familial descendents to legitimize their hold on power.⁶⁰

Yet what this article has sought to illustrate is the extent to which the Chiang cult, while serving specific political purposes, was itself

58. Roula Khalaf, “A portrait of the artist,” *Financial Times*, 22 March 2003, p. II.

59. The warning was first articulated in a controversial article by Taipei’s Mayor Ma Ying-jeou entitled “Minzu shi lixing baorong de shenghuo fangshi” (“Democracy is an ideally tolerant way of life”) which appeared in the 4 May 2004 edition of the *China Times*; it has also been raised in Huang Zhixian, *Jiegou Taiwan xin ducai (Deconstructing Taiwan’s New Dictatorship)* (Taipei: Miluo wenhua, 2004).

60. Future scholarship may also address the actual deification of Chiang after his death through the establishment of temples dedicated specifically to him, in Taiwan and elsewhere.

influenced by changing political circumstances. It is tempting to assume that personality cults are static movements – as monolithic as the bronze statues of Chiang Kai-shek that can still be found on Taiwanese campuses today.⁶¹ But this approach blinds us to the changing contexts in which cults such as this one developed, and the complex relationships between different organizations involved in the worship of state leaders. There are other contributing factors, too, that have not been touched on in this study: advances in technology, for instance, or Taiwan's interaction with other societies in which similar cults were fostered.

In any case, the development of the Chiang personality cult is a reminder that the longevity of Nationalist rule was just as reliant on non-state actors, as well as state-funded but largely independent institutions, as it was on repression. A culture in which propaganda was fostered and loyalty to the nation's leader rewarded ensured that Chiang's cult continued to grow and expand on the Republic's last province even as so much else of Nationalist polity had fallen apart in the final days of the civil war, or was transformed in the years following relocation. Heir to Sun Yat-sen; latter-day Koxinga; hero of the nation; leader – Chiang probably imagined himself as all these things at one time or another. Yet it was only through the imagination of others around and below him that he was able to present himself in such terms to the people of Taiwan.

61. A tendency that Felix Patrikeeff has noted in scholarship on the Stalin cult in "Stalinism, totalitarian society and the politics of 'perfect control'," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2003), p. 31.